

Muhammad Haji Salleh, ed. *An Anthology of Contemporary Malaysian Literature*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka, 2008. 412 pp. ISBN 978-983-62-0043-3.

In naming the anthology *An Anthology of Contemporary Malaysian Literature* and not more appropriately as an anthology of either contemporary Malay literature or Malaysian literature in Malay, Muhammad Haji Salleh is making by it an unambiguous statement of official Malaysian cultural policy. This is that Malay culture is the sole basis of Malaysian culture and, subsumed under it, only writing in Malay or Bahasa Malaysia is considered to be Malaysian national literature. All other writings not in Malay are subordinated under the category “sectional” or dismissively “trivial/aimless” literature. I do not intend, in this review, to question or debate whether the policy encompasses in any way Malaysian cultural realities or that it is just an expression of a hegemonic act. I take here the policy at its face value, but shall, after a preliminary consideration of the scope of Muhammad Haji Salleh’s inclusions for the anthology, survey the poems, short stories, plays, and critical writing included in the anthology and consider whether the survey shows that they bear up to the weight of being Malaysia’s national literature or the only literature written in Malaysia worthy of serious consideration.

Despite the editor’s categorisation of the miscellany of writings collected under the anthology as “contemporary,” none of the pieces included in it is more recent than 1983. In fact many of them, the short stories and the plays in particular, go back to the 1960’s or earlier. An oddity in the citing of sources is in the naming and dating of translations of the original texts as source texts rather than the originals themselves. This makes it difficult for the reader to know the actual dates of composition of the originals. What Muhammad Haji Salleh has made clear is only that he has not included writers who emerged in the 1970’s and 1980’s. Writing in the Introduction in the anthology’s first printing of 1988, he says, “As I write a short survey of this very crowded literary scene, I am deeply conscious of the contribution of the younger writers. Some of them have been writing for over ten years, others for a shorter period.... They belong to another volume I hope to compile before too long” (xlv). This is indeed a very serious omission: an anthology named as an “anthology of contemporary literature” does not include in it the very writings that would have given credence to the word “contemporary” in the title. Worse, twenty years had elapsed between that first printing in 1988 and the printing in 2008 of the second edition under present consideration. Yet no new writing published since has been added to this 2008 edition.

What then can the reader infer from this lack of new material to a collection that was already out-of-date at the time of its first printing? Is the truly contemporary writing (i.e. writing of the 1990's and the first decade of the new century in Bahasa Malaysia) so lacking in interest as not to merit consideration for inclusion in an anthology to showcase *contemporary* Malaysian national literature? Or is it that so little development has taken place in the national literature since the 1970's that the writings of those writers who reached maturity in 1950's and 1960's can still stand in for all subsequent writing as contemporary writing? If the writings of 1950's to 1970's – figures who include Usman Awang, A. Samad Said, Arena Wati, Shahnnon Ahmad, Kemala, and Kassim Ahmad – are still considered to be contemporary, then it may be said that our national literature in their concerns has developed little beyond de-tribalisation and its anxieties, ongoing resentment at former British colonisers, parochial debate over whether writers should write for the sake of society or for art, fixation on a pre-colonial native cultural past and preservation of a Malay identity, and earnest advocacy of writing as a religious duty.

The only short story in the anthology's short story section that goes a little beyond these concerns is Abdullah Hussain's "A Chance Meeting at Cianjur." As recounted by the narrator who ran by chance into old friends and a Dutch hitch-hiker while travelling in Indonesia, it is a story of chance meetings and surprises, and of time and change in human relationships. Other than this, the other stories tell of people who live out their lives in closed cultures and, as their opposites, others who have left for the city to find either material success there or end up as the marginalised and exploited consigned to abject poverty. These are "mirror" selves of those who stay behind. They are people, who in having left family and community steeped in tradition and religious faith, take to Western ways and have thus become lost in a modern, commercialised, and in their view a fallen world. In a story like Shahnnon Ahmad's "Death and the Family," for instance, there are, as in a binary opposites, the stock figures of Husin, the Westernized eldest son of the family who found success in the city but has lost touch with the old ways, and Haji Solih, the younger son who stayed behind and grew up into a deeply religious, decent man.

A figure similar to Husin is Farid in Khatijah Hashim's "A Quid of Sirih, a Bowl of Water." He is a medical student who despises his father for practising traditional healing as a *pawang*. He finds life in the kampong even on a short visit unbearably boring. He has taken to the city in the expectation of a bright future. But the city as depicted in Adibah Amin's "Night of Reckoning" and A. Samad Said's "The Drain" in their different ways is seen to be at the heart of moral decay. The inhabitants are, as in Adibah Amin's story, lecherous, inconstant men and their insecure wives, while in Samad Said's, they are people brought down by sloth into lives of squalor. There are others, however, who find themselves settled in but have not become part of the city's morally fallen. They

form themselves at the city's margins into closed communities. In a community like this, it is not uncommon to find, as in A. Samad Ismail's "Ah Khaw Goes to Heaven," a figure like the narrator's Mother, whose understanding of Islam is so narrow that her one pre-occupation is to convert non-believers into the religion, even if conversion means only dressing up the potential convert in Malay clothes. In this instance of the narrator's Mother, however, there is, in her (and in people like her), a simple and basic good-heartedness, for she is trying by his conversion to save Ah Khaw, a Chinese, from the Japanese army's *Sook Ching* massacres. It has to be said, also, that Samad Ismail's intent is satire and a little bit of humour at the foibles of a community living at the margins of 1940's urban Singapore.

The section on poetry is the weakest of the creative writing sections. While it is accepted that much is lost in the translation of poetry, translators are expected minimally, even if they do not make poetry out of their translations, to write decent verse. With few exceptions, the translations as verse add up to lines of dead letters. At heart, the problem lies in the translators (with the exception of Adibah Amin) having no ear for verse rhythm. By way of example of a translator's tin ear, I quote from A. Samad Said's "Thank You":

Frequently with the quiet moon in the window
 rubber trees in the backyard, there's nothing that I wanted
 but to squeeze your hands, and embrace
 your exposed body. And in whispers saying:
 I thank you rubber tree, though dry of latex.
 Thank you for making my life, though over-anxious
 in the day, but ecstatic in the night.
 (A. Samad Said, "Thank You" 156)

Even as prose, the above lines lie limply on the page. As verse, they further fail in not showing any trace of a shaping aural structure. As to what the poem actually says, the reader may be forgiven if he assumes at first reading that "Thank You" is a poem addressed to a human lover. Coming to line 5, however, the reader is jolted by surprise in finding that it is a poem addressed to a rubber tree. As such, I think it descends from the mundane to the ridiculous.

In fiction, Samad Said is a realist writer. But in his poems (at least the ones included in the anthology), he is on the writing-for-art side in the ongoing art-for-art versus art-for-society debate among Malay writers. Written as individualist expression, his poems read like poems held over from 19th century European Romanticism without the philosophical underpinning, and replete, as the quotation from "Thank You" shows, with romantic fallacy. Other "romantic" poets who write in the mode of Samad Said, include Baha Zain, Kemala, Dharmawijaya and Zurinah Hassan. Their style is given over to the rhetorical and the extravagant. Thus:

Your hair, the deep green jungle
your breath, the swift mountain gale
your love, surf on the shore
and your passion, wild tempests
(Baha Zain, "Woman" 170)

I'm the ocean
a lovely maiden asleep on her royal bed
a moment's sketch and dancing winds
unite and his with desire
for the calm expanse
(Kemala, "Ocean" 222)

and

you are to me
my sea
because I know your voice
you are to me
my beach
because I understand your language
you are to me
o sweet whispers of the wind
the melancholic melody of the sea
background music
to my restless drama
(Zurinah Hassan, "Waves at My Feet Waves in My Heart" 204)

All three quotations above are from poems which appear to have taken off from Usman Awang's "Beloved." While the extravagance of the imagery has worked once in Usman's poem (even here the writing is dangerously close to being over the top) its recurrence in these poems as what is by now stock imagery is mere extravagance and is just that. The third poem in fact borders on the sentimental. It may be of interest to note that "Ocean" is meant to be a mystical poem, but the poem, even when read in its entirety, is so incoherent that the reader is at a loss as to whether its subject is the divine presence or the seeker for union with it.

"Beloved" belongs to a later phase in Usman Awang's writing. As a young writer, he started off as an art-for-society poet, composing many poems on the poor and the oppressed as a kind of social protest. "Pak Utih" is one of several fine poems he wrote during this period. Something of the sympathy for the poor and anger at self-serving political leaders of the original is suggested (though barely) by Adibah Amin's translation. Subsequent protest poems such

as “Black Snow,” “The Times,” and “Greetings to the Continent” included in this anthology have taken on a rhetorical shrillness and so lost the more human note of poems like “Pak Utih.” Another art-for-society poet, Kassim Ahmad, has one fine poem, “Dialogue,” in the anthology. The dialogue is between a mother and son, each consoling the other with the hope of a brighter day to come in the midst of a devastation of their fields by floods from monsoon rains. In subsequent poems, however, Kassim, like Usman before him turns rhetorical. He develops a religious strain writing poems like “Wanderer’s Journey.” Poems like this become over-inflated with such unreadable statements as:

a traveller amidst his journey
 finding the road home
 pausing a moment for meditation
 purifies his soul from conceit
 to receive knowledge.

(Kassim Ahmad, “Wanderer’s Journey” 164)

This tendency towards the grand rhetorical statement seems characteristic of the poets represented in the anthology. There are, for example, “life is a panorama from a train window/ in the midst of a journey determined by rails...” (Zurina Hassan); “serenity was the beginning of life/ self, a flower of negligence/ ousted from god’s paradise” (Kemala); “life has its own reasons/ a world of happiness or an afterworld of eternity” (Muhammad Haji Salleh); and “ask the ‘Sputnik’ and ‘Explorer’ that crashed against my chest/ ask the ‘Nautilus’ and the satanic jets that penetrated my head/ ask the five continents that have twice bled” (A. Samad Said). “Poetry” of this kind tends to become inflated into high-sounding platitudes, and degenerate as in the Samad Said instance into incoherence.

The poet who stands out among those represented in the anthology as the poet of Malay-ness is Muhammad Haji Salleh. His quintessential statement of Malay-ness is spoken by Si Tenggang, the modern returned hero-voyager of the poem, “Si Tenggang’s Homecoming,” to those of his people who, unlike him, have not ventured into the wider world:

look I am just like you
 still malay
 sensitive to what
 I believe is good
 and more ready to understand
 than my brothers

(Haji Muhammad Salleh, “Si Tenggang’s Homecoming” 191)

The poem itself is derivative of the Malay legend of Si Tenggang, a returned son of the kampong who made good in the world, even marrying a princess, but who is too ashamed to recognise his own mother whom he had left behind in abject poverty at the time when he ventured out into the world. In using the legend as the point of departure for his poem, Muhammad's intent for the poem is to have it assert his Malay identity. He also finds his roots in the old classical literature by making texts such as *Sejarah Melayu* as texts to live by. To this end, he has written elaborate commentaries chapter by chapter of the *Sejarah* text. These commentaries though meant to be "philosophical" are not particularly profound. The one poet represented in the anthology whose writing shows some consistent strength is A. Latiff Mohidin. Though not entirely free of the tendency to rhetoric common among Malay poets, his style is uncluttered and concise with clear-cut images. It is only in his poems collected here like "Mekong River," "The Puppeteer's Wayang," "Waiting," "His Thick Shroud," and "Dream I" that the quality (in both senses of the word) of the originals may be discerned.

Of the three plays in the drama section, two, *Death of a Warrior* (Usman Awang) and *Spare the Butterflies* (Noordin Hassan) are examples not so much of drama as theatre. They are performance pieces to delight the eye rather than to present action that is of any real dramatic interest. *Death of a Warrior* re-visits the Hang Tuah legend, recasting (in accordance with modern ideas of just government) Hang Jebat as the hero for his rebellion against the Sultan of Malacca who unjustly sentenced Hang Tuah to death. The play is a straightforward re-telling by dialogue, commentary and action Hang Jebat's dalliance with Dang Wangi and the other palace maids, the return of Hang Tuah from the "dead," and his duel killing of Hang Jebat. There is much opportunity for a director for spectacle through the insertion of dancing and silat in a staging of the play. Hang Jebat comes out as the hero through his dying speech of self-justification:

Citizens of Malacca,
I have fought tyranny with blood,
my own blood.
Uphold the belief that
to do good do it measure for measure,
In evil never do things by halves.
The blood that has flowed, and spilt for justice
and for that justice I give this blood. (250)

The play is written in verse. As the above quotation shows, Usman has also not escaped the tendency to rhetoric. The translator has made worse what is at best a run-of-the-mill play by rendering the original Malay into language that is not

only stilted but also riddled with grammatical mistakes and mistakes in punctuation. In fact, the verse can be unintentionally funny as, for instance:

The waters of the Straits ripples in blue
 Upon its wake a breeze blew
 A harbour grew, and merchants ships sailed through (229)

Triple end rhymes coupled with an internal rhyme are, in English verse, usually employed in music hall doggerel. If not for the play being advertised as a tragedy, a reader/an audience might well wonder if the above lines signal the beginning of a comedy or a farce. And then we might well raise our eye-brows at the following. “Waters ripples,” “merchants ships”? The waters *ripples* when a breeze *blew*? And no full stops? I cannot decide whether the errors in the lines are grammatical or typographical.

As with *Death of a Warrior*, *Spare the Butterflies* is also written for spectacle rather than for any dramatic interest. The underlying concept of the play is that of modernist theatre of the absurd with infusions into it of elements of song and dance from traditional Malay theatre. The intent of Noordin Hassan, as he has explained, is to create non-Aristotelian theatre “that initiates the thinking process of the paths of human thoughts – in wider terms – perhaps putting an audience conditioned by the Aristotelian theatre through certain difficulties.” There, indeed, are “certain difficulties,” for if it is considered ground-breaking Malay theatre it is ground-breaking only in that Noordin models the play on the theatre of the absurd and for its recourse to symbolism. The moral of the play may be summed up in the Clown’s (a character in the play) “revelation” to the other characters, “Turn your face in its (the kibat’s) direction/ Verily, people of the faith know/ that is the way/ Required by Allah/ Allah is always knowledgeable/ knowing everything that one does” (259). Though the sentiment here is estimable, intellectually this is hardly revolutionary. Those among an audience who regularly worship in congregation must have heard this said a thousand times. The language of the translation is precious in an almost embarrassing way.

Unlike the authors of *Death of a Warrior* and *Spare the Butterflies*, the playwright who wrote *Ana* has shown the right instinct here for drama. Over two scenes that make up the play, Dinsman very skilfully keeps up the tension in the conflict between Ana and her parents. Her parents try to reason with, cajole, threaten and scold her into consenting to something which the playwright does not reveal right up to the end of the play. Thereby, he maintains throughout its duration the interest of an audience/ reader. Unlike the Usman Awang and Noordin Hassan texts, the language of the dialogue in *Ana* is a naturalistic Educated Malaysian-Singaporean Speech (EMS), an English spoken by the business and professional classes in Malaysia and Singapore. The

writing of it is economical in the sense that there is not a word of it that is extraneous. As far as can be determined from the translation, Noordin has used it to distinguish one character from another. The father's tone is angry and bullying, while the mother's is both cajoling and protective of her daughter. And Ana herself comes across in her speech as sullen and resentful. Noordin's achievement in this play is an undoubted one albeit that it is within a small compass.

As for literary criticism, if the critical pieces in the anthology are any reflection of the general situation, contemporary Malay literary criticism is in the dark ages. The critics have not gone far beyond the art-for-art's sake versus art-for-society's-sake debate. In his account of developments in Malay literature, Muhammad Haji Salleh can point only to the adoption of Western literary forms and the growth of tendencies towards individualism in Malay writing as major literary developments. In another direction, there is the move towards involving literature in religion. Shanon Ahmad writes of literary activity as a religious duty, while Noordin Hassan in theatre work looks towards Islam for core inspiration. There are also those who find it a matter of importance to ask whether writers should return to the kampong and write authentically as "sons" and "daughters" of a close-knit community steeped in tradition and Islam or remain in the city as Westernized "lost" individuals.

In general, the literati (amongst whom the critics are counted), see Western intellectual influence as a threat to their identity and spare themselves the effort to read widely in Western languages, especially English, and learn from whatever that is of value that Western writers, from poets to the most abstruse of philosophers, have to offer. Because of this, the Malay critical writings now extant show clear signs that developments over the 20th century in critical theory and practice, linguistics, cultural studies, and philosophy have passed them by. This leaves Malay contemporary critical practice truly in the intellectual shallows. In the absence of a tradition of mature critical comment and discussion, no literature can hope to attain robust growth and flowering. Thus Malay literature is left to straggle on barren ground. But if it is considered to be of sufficient weight by itself to stand alone as Malaysia's national literature, then Malaysia has to be a mono-cultural backwater state that has barely left the 19th century behind as the cultural nationalists wish it to be and not a country with a diversity of cultures and a literature that speaks with a multiplicity of tongues that it, in fact, is.

That the anthology is in English translation means that the editor and his publishers intend it to be read by a wider readership than just Malaysians. With that intent in mind, the editor should have taken the trouble to do a professional job of work in its compilation and editing. A professional job of work means that he should have included, as a guide to the reader, biographical notes on the authors represented in the collection and indices of titles of the

works included and of the names of authors. More importantly, he should not have allowed the book to go to press with its pages riddled with grammatical and typographical errors. Moreover, the English style of the Introduction and most of the translated works presented in the volume is either colourless and flaccid like the language taught in language for communications classes or inflated and at times archaic. It must be with some hubris that Muhammad Haji Salleh put together the anthology to showcase to the world Malay literature as Malaysian National Literature. That hubris can be forgiven if the writing represented in the anthology is of such literary worth and cultural inclusiveness that writers in all the other language streams have to hold their peace and defer to literature in Malay as the only Malaysian national literature.

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